

**RELIGION**  
AND THE  
**CHILDREN.**

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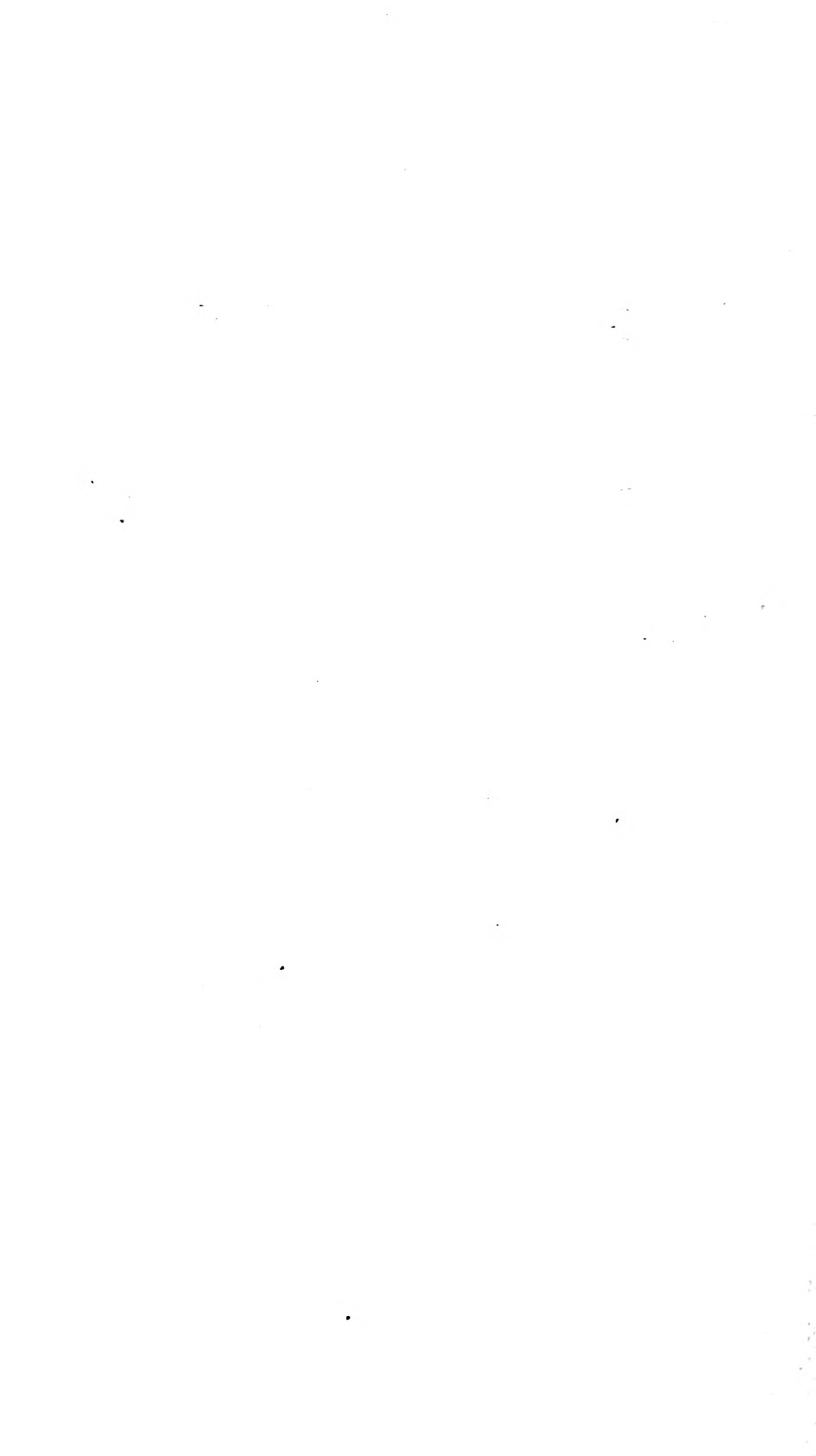
BY

**RABBI ISRAEL I. MATTUCK, A.M.**

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A Sermon preached at Bechstein Hall at the Service of the  
Liberal Jewish Synagogue, on the Morning of the Day of  
— Atonement, October 7th. 1916. —



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“Ye stand this day, all of you before the Lord your God, you and your children to enter into the Covenant of the Lord your God.” (Deut. xxix., 10 and 11.)

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The religious training of the child is of sufficiently large importance and interest to be the subject for our thoughts on this greatest day in the Jewish year. In divers ways, the observance of this day brings it compellingly before our minds. We think of our responsibilities, and endeavour to gauge the measure of our living up to them, to discover wherein and how far we have transgressed, with what faithfulness we have performed the tasks laid upon us. There are the duties we owe to our religion, which must now be imperiously present in our thought; for if not on this day, sanctified by our religion above all others, on the day when we are told to commune for judgment upon our life and conduct, then when? And if never, what is the meaning of our Judaism? Responsibilities in general, moral and spiritual responsibilities, and the duties we owe to our religion, all involve a consideration of what we are doing for our children. The question is brought home to us by this morning's reading from the Scroll. “Ye stand all of you to-day before the Lord your God, you and your children, to enter the covenant.” Our presence here is not for ourselves, but also for those who are not here, the young, and the future generations. They are concerned in the effort for moral and spiritual advancement we make this day. The children as they are now, and as they will be in the future, men and women, are present with us to share in whatever this service may bring. Our children are entering a new life, if we are; entering into the covenant between God and man, and the special covenant between God and Israel.

The matter concerns not only those who are parents, but all Jews, for it is one that is of vital importance for our Jewish brotherhood and its future welfare. When to-day we make confession of sins, we must confess not only as individuals, each for his own sins, but as members of a community for the community's sins and transgressions. And if in the training of children any of us have been at fault, it is the concern of all of us. The welfare and future existence of Judaism lays a responsibility upon each one. Moreover, there is need for a strong Jewish public opinion in this matter, to give the individual Jew direction and strong impulsion, to emphasise the duty the parent owes to our faith, in the education of his child.

The future of our faith depends upon that education. The Rabbis said, “Jerusalem was destroyed because of the neglect of the children's instruction.” Any neglect in this education at present may work itself out cumulatively into a great weakness in the future. There are innumerable signs of the existence of a tendency away from our faith. The

members of a minority religion are always subjected to the strain of great temptation. Men do not naturally like to be separate and distinguished from the large body of their fellow men. Differences in religion make a sharp distinction, standing, for example, in the way of establishing the most sacred and binding relation among men—that of marriage. It is perhaps only natural that where, in such a circumstance, that difference is obviated, the religion that is in the minority should lose an adherent. Though there have been, and there are, many exceptions, the normal danger of loss remains. There is a fairly strong tendency away from our faith. We cannot look with equanimity upon the number of those who leave us to join the dominant community, or to be away from all religious communities. We Liberal Jews must see in this tendency a special challenge. We have no right to take consolation in the staunch loyalty of the Jews who newly left the Ghetto, in whom the instinct of solidarity is still strong, fostered early in life by strict and literal adherence to ancient tradition. Our very effort to establish our religion upon an occidental basis and to give it expression in occidental terms necessitates the removal of some practices that have served as props and forces to maintain Jewish loyalty from without. Therefore, we are confronted with the imperious task of strengthening the spirit of loyalty from within. We do not fear that there will be, any more than there has been, more apostasy among Liberal than among Orthodox Jews. By a law of re-action, the latter run the greater danger. Their losses would even now be greater than they are, if it were not for the power of Liberal Judaism. This fact aggravates the task of Liberal Judaism, and increases its responsibility.

It may, further, be feared that the future will impose an even greater strain than the past upon the loyalty of Jews to their religion. Jeremiads are unpopular at this time, and rightly so. Evil forebodings of the time to come are never very acceptable among men, and less so at a time when the present is itself sufficiently dark; yet certain facts must be faced. We Jews must, I think, be prepared for an increase of prejudice against us, which, even as the original, is unreasonable; but prejudice never reasons, it is nurtured in ignorance. There are some who, for reasons best known to themselves, feed constantly this venomous fire with the fuel of lying insinuations.

Though we had the right to expect that the conduct of Jews, which, as the conduct of their neighbours, was prompted by, and expressed in, a full measure of national loyalty and a great spirit of self-sacrifice, should teach to the unreasoning reason, and so remove what prejudice there had been, yet it is to be feared that that result may not come, but its opposite. I hope this prophecy will prove wholly wrong. Present signs, unfortunately, point to the danger. It means that our children will have more to contend with; it will be harder for them to be loyal than it is for us; their position as members of a small minority, rightly to be brought home to them only by a proper emphasis on religious differences, may be embittered by a prejudice of which we know but little. They will require great strength and an indomitable spirit of loyalty within themselves to resist the forces that shall seek to break the bond which unites them with Judaism, to drive them away from their ancient faith. If, when the test comes they should prove themselves weak, the blame will be upon us, unless now we strive as best we can to imbue them with a spirit of devotion that shall burn with a consuming flame, using even prejudice and hatred as fuel to heighten its glow, and increase its light and power.

That is the spirit which has burned in the hearts of Jews throughout the centuries and enabled them to survive unnumbered persecutions and

to proclaim their faith triumphantly in the presence of the enemy and death. It lives to-day in the hearts of those Jews in other lands whose lot—who can describe it? Yet they would not exchange it for another, with their loyalty to Judaism the price. Can we implant such a spirit in our children? We *must* try.

A century ago it would have not been necessary to plead with Jews for greater interest in the religious education of their children and for greater attention to it. All the education that the Jew had at the time was religious, and he did not underrate its importance. He had received a tradition from our ancient teachers, which emphasised the greatness and the value of the instruction of children, and he strove to abide by it. The study of the law was a paramount religious duty. The teaching of it to children was the greatest of good deeds; so that the teacher was entitled even to more reverence than the parent. God Himself, say the ancient sages, in their quaint way, spends part of the day in teaching young children. "The moral order of the universe depends on the breath of the school-children." The attitude towards education expressed in such sayings became firm, fixed in the Jewish tradition, and it prevails in many Jewish communities down to this day. When the child has barely learned to lisp "Father" and "Mother," his instruction is begun. Hebrew is the subject of that early teaching, that he might early learn to pray and understand the prayers, and that he might, when still young, come to know the treasures in the storehouse of his ancient literature. And at an age when other children are just beginning their education, learning perhaps the first rudiments of reading and writing, he begins to seek his way through the difficulties, mazes and logical intricacies of the Talmud. That devotion of the Jew to education has left a mark on his character which survives to the present, his love of education. He has now transferred it to a larger field. Many an observer of Jewish life has commented on the sacrifices the poor Jewish parents often make in order that their children may obtain an education up to as high a point as is possible, sacrifices which at times seem almost superhuman. There is a passion for education. The centuries-old emphasis on the study of the Law and the teaching of the young has begotten it. The command in the Shema, "Thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children" has in the past been faithfully obeyed by the Jews.

There may be no need to complain of Jews for any neglect of general education. If there were, this would perhaps not be the time for it; but there is, I fear, much cause for complaining about the neglect of purely religious education. There is, therefore, the need to emphasize the greatness of our responsibility in this matter. This responsibility belongs primarily to the parents; upon them lies the task of instruction. It is part of the price that must be paid for the joy, the blessing and the immortality children give. It is in itself even part of the very gift, for an increase of responsibility means an increased opportunity for that service by which we worship God.

But they delegate the task. A delegation of part of the task is perhaps unavoidable. A technical knowledge is necessary, which we cannot expect all parents to possess, though there is no reason why they should not have a knowledge of the matter to be taught. But even though they may delegate part of the task, they may not, they cannot, delegate all of it; for religion's chief temple is the home. It is the best school, where the most effective teaching can be given with the most lasting results. It is the shrine whose light burns itself into men's hearts, whose incense, wafted into their very souls, remains for all time

to pervade their lives, whose sanctity so takes root and abides, that through years of temptation and trial it may be marred, but can never be destroyed. The memories of home persevere in all circumstances. Its sacrifices of love are among the most faithful messages of God's love, whose force never dies. Every father is a priest, every mother a priestess; and every child a Samuel to be trained for God's service, for the reception of God's message, that when it comes he may say, "Here I am; speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth."

Nothing can take the place of the home, and make amends to the child if he be removed from it. Similarly nothing can make up for the absence of a spiritual atmosphere in the home. A child who is brought up in such a home has adequate cause for complaint, when it grows up and finds its life poor and meagre, without any outlook upon a greater life, without any vision of a reality greater than what is near. The home without a spiritual atmosphere is doing all it can to make of its children human animals, to whom food and the way of obtaining it are the chief concern of life. We plot and plan and work to supply the children with material capital with which to start their lives. Are we equally eager to prepare them with spiritual capital?

The case of the parents who say of themselves that they are not religious, presents perhaps a difficulty. But what does not being religious mean? Does it mean the absence of any spiritual life, blindness to the reality of forces beyond the ken of physical sense, a failure to recognise that there is something above and beyond material conditions and possessions of life, and an imperviousness to the influence of this something beyond, and the absence of any conscious attitude toward it? There may be some such people; then their life is infinitely poor, and they can transmit only their poverty. The number of them, however, cannot but be almost infinitesimal. But our presence here to-day should be a testimony to our realisation of the existence of a spiritual world and to a desire to enter it.

In the creation of a spiritual atmosphere in the home, and for us that means a specifically Jewish atmosphere, signs of Judaism must be used. The children learn of the things of the spirit through expressive and beautiful symbols, even as we learn of the things of the mind through words. And by Jewish signs, they learn to feel and to know the Jewish spirit. Our holy days are such symbols; the sanctification of them in the home brings something of their meaning to the youngest child. And our rich tradition will supply parents with such practices as will best express their Jewishness and be a means for inculcating it in their children.

The work of the home can be, and ought to be, supplemented by attendance at the services in the Synagogue. Such attendance, however, is only valuable if the father and mother, too, attend. It is a common error to believe it sufficient in the child's interest, to send him to religious services while the parents themselves consistently stay away. It would be difficult to say which of the two evils—that of parents and children together staying away, or that of parents staying away and children attending—is the greater. The child, when alone, may get something out of attendance at the Synagogue service; but how much can that be if the child knows the parent never attends such a service, or at best, very rarely? But there are those who seem to think that in religion the child's activities may very early be made independent of those of the father and mother. That attitude is expressed in: "I am not religious, but I want my child to be taught religion." It is an impossible wish.

By peculiar and indescribable laws which religion sometimes seems to follow, the child of the parents who have shown no interest in religion may grow up to be religious in spite of the parents, but ordinarily such a difference between parents and children may not be expected. It is the old story—children learn by example, not from precept; and where there is a difference between the example and the precept, one of two things must suffer, either the child's respect for the teacher or the child's respect for the precept. If we ourselves do not attend services but say to our children, "Do you go," the result must be either that the child will in his heart think of us as in a measure unworthy, or think of going to services as a bore, and receive from the services nothing of value. In religion, the parents cannot separate themselves from the children.

The same thing applies in the case of those parents who say, "Let our children come to know the old religion just as it was, in all its fulness and all its details, for though it is true that we ourselves do not believe in it or adhere to it, yet the more they learn the larger will be the final residue." There is the same destructive difference. All the learning is vitiated by it, and instead of there being a residue, there can be nothing. If we teach the child what we ourselves do not believe, he will end by not even believing what we do; for he cannot choose. If we tell the children about the need for doing many things, some of which they see we ourselves do not do, then they will in the end scorn even those we do observe. There can, I think, be no greater danger to the spiritual life of the child than to teach him a religion different from that *practised* by his father and mother.

We must now consider the practical difficulties for Jews in the way of a consistent adherence to the attitude I have indicated, difficulties inherent in our present surroundings. It is impossible for most of us to observe the Sabbath as a day of complete rest. There is, I fear, no complete escape from this difficulty. To minimise it as best we can is the most we can do. The Friday evening gives us all the opportunity for a full emphasis on the sanctity of the day. In the home, the thought of the day's sanctity need in no part of it be lost sight of. The father should explain to the child why he cannot altogether observe the day as one of rest, and he must all the more observe those hours when he is free from work; and all should together use the opportunities for worship in the home and the Synagogue. I need not remind you that the Saturday afternoon service at our Synagogue was meant to give an opportunity to join in public worship to those who are constrained to work on that day.

Another difficulty is the absence of children, especially boys, from home in the most formative years of their life, to attend a school. They present a very serious problem; it has been neglected in a measure, but its gravity cannot be exaggerated. At a time when the character is most responsive to influences, when almost everything with which it comes into contact leaves a mark upon it, when it is gathering the threads of its life out of its environment, the boy is for the larger part of the year removed from the atmosphere of the Jewish home. His need is greatest, because there are other influences working on him, for the atmosphere into which he is put is not free from religious forces. Our congregation has been experimenting with a method of reaching such boys and girls.\* The lessons sent to them, besides the instruction they afford, may have the further value of counteracting the effects of a non-Jewish atmosphere, by reminding them that they are not part of it, that they are Jews. As for the rest, the home must do its best to impress its religious spirit upon them in those periods when they are in it. I confess the difficulty is

\* The method referred to is religious instruction by correspondence.



great, and it may be questioned whether it does not altogether condemn, so far as Jews are concerned, the system which produces it.

The danger, however, lies mostly in the indifference of parents. True it is part of a larger indifference to all things religious, but perhaps the gravest phase of that indifference is here, in its effect upon the religious instruction of the children, which must be lastingly baneful. It jeopardises lives in their foundations, in their immortal part. Instead of looking upon religious education as the fundamental element in a child's training, there are those who look upon it as of so little importance, that they assign to it the last claim upon the child's time and endeavours. There are so many things, they say, the child must learn, that there is no time for religious education. After the work of the secular schools, there are music and elocution, and dancing lessons, and the child must have some time for walks and play. There is no time to attend religious classes. I do not know how such people can be argued out of their attitude. The whole point of view seems so wrong and topsy-turvy. To put dancing before character! It shows so little thought of the spiritual and moral welfare of children; how can we argue with those who hold such a point of view?

This attitude is, in a measure, due to a love of cleverness. We worship cleverness; and religious education does not help children to be clever. Now, we have seen what cleverness means. The Germans were, and are, a very clever people, so clever that the world, even while reprobatng them, had to admire their ingenuity. This would have been an infinitely better and happier world, much suffering would have been avoided, great wrongs left undone, and lives uncounted preserved for usefulness, if, instead of being clever, the Germans were more righteous, instead of knowing so much about machines and instruments, they knew more about the things of all else, they exercised thir hearts in the love of God and man. We may make our children clever at the expense of their souls; and even a dull saint is better than a brilliant sinner.

The secular schools cannot in any way serve the function of religious training. It is to be feared that even particular sectarian schools do not achieve great results in this direction. The teaching of Scripture as a mental exercise is not the teaching of religion. Nor is the teaching of Hebrew religious instruction, though to many, Jewish religious instruction means especially that, Not all Hebrew instruction is useless, much of it is; because much of it aims no higher than imparting an ability to translate symbols into sounds that, to the child, have no meaning. So long as we use Hebrew in our services, it will be necessary to acquaint our children with those prayers which we utter in that language, but that is only a means to an end. A real knowledge of Hebrew has its value; but it is only a greatly exaggerated idea of that value that can see in it great religious significance.

But to return to general secular education. It is true that all education is, in theory, directed towards the formation of character, towards the cultivation of those habits of mind and heart and conduct which shall be characterised by adherence to the right and to the true. How far present secular education does serve this end might well be questioned, especially when we consider that a knowledge of facts seems to be its main goal; examinations are its test. There is much to be done before knowledge can be translated into qualities of character. Religious instruction addresses itself directly to the implanting of those qualities, spiritual and moral, out of which character and life should be constructed. Its basis is not mental acquisition but spiritual tradition; the

foundation it seeks to lay is faith. It is needless to dilate upon this point, when we consider the special needs of Jews. Even though secular schools adequately served their aim and succeeded in developing good men out of our boys and good women out of our girls, there would still remain for Jewish boys and girls to become good Jews and Jewesses.

But some parents refuse, on principle, to supply religious instruction to their children. They wish their children to be free, when they grow up, to choose their religion. They, in other words, shirk their responsibility, shift it from their shoulders to the children's. It is, in a measure, true that the child cannot grasp all that religion means. But no more can he grasp all that anything he is taught means. Religion, however, has this advantage, that it is of the heart as much as of the head, if not more. And the heart runs ahead of the mind, and can feel the force and beauty of the true and the good long before the mind can understand or analyse them. The implications of faith in God may be firmly implanted in the child's heart and feeling long before he understands who God is. Furthermore, to deprive a child of religious instruction is not to leave him free to choose his religion when he grows up, but to deny him that freedom. He will choose in any case, but the absence of some religious training in his early years limits his choice. The religious attitude is not normally easy to acquire without an early training. Again, why wait until the child can choose? We direct his early life in every way, seeking to develop interests in one direction and to check them in another, leading him to one goal and away from another, to enrich his life and to fit him for maturity. If our own adherence to religion is faithful, and if we look upon it, not as a negligible quantity in our life, or as a sort of luxury, but as a vital and effective reality, then we shall not talk of letting the child choose. We should want him to have it. We may apply here the prophet's condemnation of those "who hide themselves from their own flesh." If we ourselves have any faith, the love and the zeal which that faith implies should be revealed above all to our children that they may start life with the advantage of our help.

The nation has been roused to the realisation of the need to preserve its child life. The great toll the war has imposed upon its manhood threatens so to impoverish the national life as to make incumbent the adoption of all means possible for preserving and developing every new life that comes into it. But life means more than physical existence, it means more than the power to work with more or less efficiency for the sake of maintaining itself and making some contribution to the material well-being of the nation. Life means moral force and spiritual might. It means the zeal for righteousness, the love of truth; life means character sanctified by devotion to God and throbbing with the readiness to serve Him. This is the kind of life that the nation needs. It is the force by which humanity is reared and grows, from which blessings untold issue forth. That is the life which it is ours to help create in our children, for the generations to come.

